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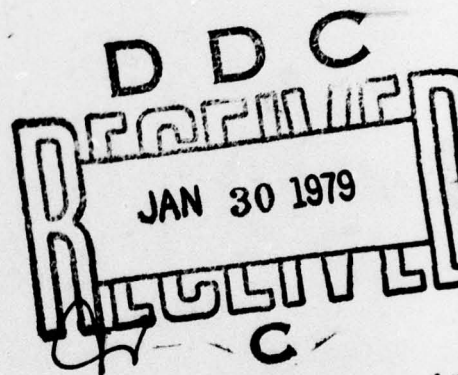
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## ERITREA AND THE SOVIET-CUBAN CONNECTION



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⑥ **ERITREA AND THE SOVIET-CUBAN CONNECTION ,**

by

⑩ **Daniel S. Papp**

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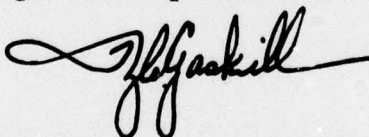


## FOREWORD

This memorandum examines the evolution of the current Eritrean situation, and devotes particular attention to the roles the Soviet Union and Cuba played in the growth of the insurgency. The author observes that while the Soviet Union and Cuba have some congruent interests in the Eritrean-Ethiopian conflict, they also have significant differences in interest over particular issues. He concludes that it is therefore likely that Soviet and Cuban aid to the Ethiopian regime in its effort to overcome the Eritreans will continue, but that it may be significantly cut back. Additionally, the different Soviet and Cuban interests over Eritrea may lead to additional divergencies within the Soviet-Cuban connection.

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This memorandum was prepared as a contribution to the field of national security research and study. As such, it does not reflect the official view of the College, the Department of the Army, or the Department of Defense.



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**DR. DANIEL S. PAPP** is currently on leave from his position as Associate Professor at Georgia Tech, and is serving as a Research Professor with the Strategic Studies Institute. A graduate of Dartmouth College, he received his doctorate in international affairs at the University of Miami's Center for Advanced International Studies. He spent much of last year as a visiting lecturer in Australia. Dr. Papp has published articles on Soviet foreign policy in a number of professional journals.

## **ERITREA AND THE SOVIET-CUBAN CONNECTION**

The recent Ethiopian-Somalian border war over the Ogaden region of Ethiopia once again has centered world attention on Soviet and Cuban activities on the African continent. By the time Ethiopian forces reached the Somali borders in mid-March 1978, the Soviet Union had funneled nearly one billion dollars worth of military equipment into Ethiopia during a 3 month airlift, and Cuban military personnel in Ethiopia had risen to number 17,000.<sup>1</sup> Without the Soviet and Cuban aid, Ethiopia would have almost certainly lost the Ogaden.

Nonetheless, while Soviet-Cuban support for Ethiopia's ruling body, the Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC, also known as the Dergue) under the leadership of Colonel Mengistu Haile-Mariam, succeeded in repulsing the Somali invasion, it assured neither the continued rule of the Dergue nor Ethiopia's territorial integrity. The Dergue's rule is challenged by the Marxist Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party and the royalist Ethiopian Democratic Union, while national liberation movements remain active in Western Somalia, Afar, Tigre, and Eritrea.

It is the Eritrean struggle for national independence which is militarily most critical for the Dergue. As of early April 1978, various Eritrean separatist movements controlled 90 percent of Eritrea's



territory, and had the capital, Asmara, and major port, Massawa, under seige. Assab, the other major port, has been subjected to occasional terrorist attack.<sup>2</sup>

The Eritrean struggle is similarly critical to PMAC from economic and political standpoints. Without Eritrea's 650-mile shoreline on the Red Sea, Ethiopia would be landlocked and dependent on surface shipping arriving through either the Sudan, Kenya, Djibouti, Somalia, or Eritrea. Aside from economics, an Eritrean succession would inevitably strengthen the resolve of other separatist movements within Ethiopia, and further complicate Mengistu's domestic political problems.

Much of Eritrea's importance is also evident to Moscow and Havana. Both capitals recognize that events in Eritrea may have widespread political, ideological, and, particularly to the Kremlin, strategic ramifications. Politically, Moscow and Havana are obviously committed to Mengistu's regime, and have a stake in its survival. Ideologically, Soviet and Cuban opposition to national movements they formerly supported must be credibly explained. Strategically, Soviet intimacy with Ethiopia has cost it its base rights at Berbera in Somalia, and either Massawa or Assab could prove acceptable substitutes.

It is the purpose of this essay, then, to examine the ramifications of the Eritrean struggle to both Soviet and Cuban foreign policy, and analyze the factors which may influence Soviet and Cuban policymakers as they decide whether, and indeed how deeply, to become involved in Ethiopia's crisis in Eritrea.

### GROWTH OF THE INSURGENCY

Eritrea has historically been a center of conflict. Although Christian Eritreans have long had close ties with the Ethiopian Coptic Church, the Ottoman Empire controlled the strategic Eritrean coast from the sixteenth century to 1890 when Italian suzerainty was established. Italy retained control of the territory until 1941 when British armies swept Italian forces from the area and provided the Allies with their first World War II victory.

Churchill, Roosevelt, and Stalin deferred a decision on disposition of the erstwhile Italian colony, quite possibly because it already had become a contentious issue. Great Britain hoped to maintain possession after the war, while the United States, by 1942, was already operating a communications facility at Asmara. For the Soviets, Stalin had

indicated at Tehran and Yalta that the Soviet Union desired to administer Eritrea under a postwar trusteeship.<sup>3</sup> Following the war, the deadlock remained although the forum of debate shifted to the United Nations. Meanwhile, Eritrea remained under British military administration.

Finally, on December 2, 1950, the United Nations adopted a resolution recommending Eritrean federation with Ethiopia. The federation was implemented on September 15, 1952, and remained in effect until December 1962 when, following a pro-integration vote by the Eritrean Assembly, Eritrea became a full-fledged province of Haile Selassie's realm.

Within Eritrea itself, these proceedings were accomplished by the growth of political movements divided by policy disagreements, religion, and race. As early as 1943, Eritrean Christians founded the Unionist Party which favored total integration with Ethiopia. Other Christians and some Moslems formed the Liberal Progressive Party which supported independence or a loose federation with Ethiopia. In 1946, the Moslem League was created and demanded full independence for Eritrea.<sup>4</sup>

The 1952 federation proved unhappy for Eritrea as Ethiopia gradually expanded its influence in the new autonomous province. As the substance of Eritrean autonomy eroded, political refugees fled to neighboring nations. By the late 1950's and early 1960's, the refugee Eritreans established the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) in Cairo and supported full independence. The 1962 union of Ethiopia and Eritrea strengthened the Front considerably. A predominantly Moslem organization, the ELF shifted its base of operation to Damascus, and until 1965 concentrated its efforts on propaganda and developing contacts within the Arab world. In 1965 the Front established a supreme military command in Khartoum to oversee military operations in the five so-called Eritrean military districts.

Following the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, the ELF's traditionalist Moslem leanings were increasingly questioned by the Front's Christian and radical members. Although no open split occurred, discord grew during the subsequent 3 years.<sup>5</sup>

The ELF first commanded international attention when it attacked an Ethiopian Airlines 707 at Frankfurt Airport on March 11, 1969. During the subsequent year, at least four other ELF-initiated hijackings were attempted.<sup>6</sup> Within Eritrea itself, an estimated 600 to 6,000 rebels controlled one-third of the territory.<sup>7</sup>



Even with these successes, however, internal ELF problems remained. In 1970, the predominantly Christian Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), itself Marxist-oriented, split from the ELF. From 1971 to 1974, the two liberation movements battled each other, as well as Haile Selassie's forces. Despite this division within the Eritrean national movement, ELF and EPLF military gains in Eritrea were so impressive by the summer of 1974 that Colin Legum, the noted English observer of African affairs, returned to London from the area and declared "there can no longer be any serious hope of defeating the rebels by military force. The only practical question now is what kind of political settlement is possible."<sup>8</sup>

While much of the credit for the success of the ELF and EPLF was due the movements themselves, it was at the same time evident that both groups received extensive external support. Haile Selassie's government regularly accused unnamed "outside nations and groups" of aiding and abetting the rebel cause,<sup>9</sup> and on occasion displayed captured Russian, Czechoslovakian, British, and Spanish weapons.<sup>10</sup> For the most part, it appeared as if external aid to the ELF did in fact begin in about 1965, slowed following the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, and then accelerated through at least 1971.<sup>11</sup>

External aid to the ELF and EPLF arrived from two sources, Arab states and Communist states. Before the movement split, the Sudan, Somalia, Egypt, Syria, and Iraq were the primary Moslem donors. These states viewed the insurrection as an Arab movement. After the split, Syria and Iraq continued to support the ELF, while a new supplier, Libya, reportedly extended 7.2 million dollars in aid to the EPLF.<sup>12</sup> The level of Arab aid to the Eritrean separatists has always been uncertain, and the fracture in the Front made both the level and sources of Arab support more obscure.

The same is also true of Communist aid to the Eritrean movements. The People's Republic of China apparently extended aid to the ELF during the 1960's, but terminated its support to the movement after Peking established diplomatic relations with Addis Ababa in 1970. Bulgaria operated several companies in Eritrea during the late 1960's and early 1970's which may have served as conduits for aid shipments. During the same period, the Eritrean secessionists used light arms, bazookas, 81-millimeter mortars, land mines, and AK-47's of Soviet and Czechoslovakian origin, although some prisoners and defectors maintained that most Soviet bloc weapons were received from the Palestinians, specifically Al Fatah, and not directly from Communist



countries.<sup>13</sup> There is no doubt, however, that ELF cadre trained in Cuba at least between 1967 and 1971.<sup>14</sup>

While Cuba had few nonmaterial constraints on the aid it extended to the Eritrean Liberation Front and Eritrean People's Liberation Front, the same was not necessarily true for the Soviet Union. Indeed, as unlikely as it may seem, the Kremlin had a history of rather cordial relations with Haile Selassie's regime to consider, extending back at least as far as strong Soviet vocal support for the Emperor during the 1935 Italian invasion. While Soviet military aid to Somalia following the latter's independence in 1960 somewhat strained Soviet-Ethiopian relations, numerous examples of the predominant cordiality still existed. Khrushchev himself commented on the Kremlin's "excellent relations" with Selassie, and between 1954 and 1967 the Soviet Union extended 15 million dollars in aid to Ethiopia, the third highest Soviet aid total to Africa during those years.<sup>15</sup> Selassie himself was greeted extremely cordially when he traveled to the Soviet Union in 1959, 1967, 1970, and 1973.<sup>16</sup> According to one report, he also received a Soviet promise that the Kremlin would support Ethiopia's territorial integrity before his 1967 trip.<sup>17</sup> Even when Selassie was in the last few months of his reign, Soviet-Ethiopian relations remained close as indicated by the Emperor boarding a Soviet destroyer berthed in Massawa to celebrate Ethiopian Naval Day.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, by early 1974, the Eritrean situation presented a fascinating picture. A divided national liberation movement, one wing predominantly Arab and the other predominately Christian-Marxist, was increasingly successful. Radical Arab states, particularly the Sudan, Syria, Iraq, and Libya, and Communist states, particularly Cuba, supported the divided movement even though the most powerful Communist state, the Soviet Union, maintained cordial relations with Ethiopia and supported Ethiopia's territorial integrity. The United States, for its part, also had close relations with Ethiopia, maintained a major communications facility at Kagnaw Center near Asmara, and secretly concluded a 1960 agreement with Ethiopia opposing threats to Ethiopia's territorial integrity.<sup>19</sup> Although world attention remained riveted elsewhere, Eritrea was a potential powder keg.

#### **THE 1974 REVOLUTION AND ITS IMPACT ON SOVIET-ETHIOPIAN RELATIONS**

The attention that the Eritrean insurgency slowly was beginning to

receive in early 1974 was rapidly diverted by events in Addis Ababa itself. During the spring, growing army unrest and mutinies in several garrisons forced Selassie to replace his government, draft a new constitution, and promise a land reform program, among other things. These steps quieted the unrest for a time, but disenchantment with the Emperor had grown too strong to be stilled permanently. On September 12, 1974, the last "Conquering Lion of Judah" was deposed, and the Provisional Military Administrative Council assumed ultimate power.

PMAC itself was beset by division between radical and moderate elements. The first head of the Dergue, the moderate General Aman Andom, who favored a negotiated settlement with the Eritrean separatists, was assassinated in November 1974. Over 2 years of political infighting and intrigue followed, replete with assassinations, attempted coups, and extreme brutality. Finally, on February 3, 1977, Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam emerged preeminent in the Dergue following an attempted coup and a shoot-out among its members.

Throughout this period, the Dergue implemented policies designed to establish socialism in Ethiopia. As early as December 1974, the new government declared that it intended to transform the country into a Socialist nation with a one-party system, collective farms, and government control of all productive property. On April 21, 1976, PMAC announced a political program which was centered on formal adoption of "scientific socialism." The program additionally called for increased government control of the economy and some measure of regional autonomy for certain provinces including Eritrea.<sup>20</sup>

With the unveiling of the Dergue's political program, the Soviet attitude toward the Dergue altered considerably. Before the new program became public, Soviet commentary about events in Ethiopia following Haile Selassie's deposition was limited to factual accounts and occasional favorable assessments of the Dergue's actions.<sup>21</sup> Given both the Kremlin's history of close relations with the former Emperor and the uncertainty of the course of events in Ethiopia, this was not surprising. Immediately following the unveiling of the new program, however, a veritable barrage of Soviet commentary about the Dergue began. The new regime was leading a "national democratic revolution" and had become an "active participant in the anti-imperialist and anticolonial struggle."<sup>22</sup> In the Soviet political-ideological lexicon, these were indeed complementary words.

Other indications of new Soviet-Ethiopian intimacy followed



rapidly. In June 1976, the two countries signed cultural and scientific cooperation agreements. An Ethiopian state delegation journeyed to Moscow the following month; Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs Gromyko told its members that the "strong traditions" of friendship between their two countries could "further strengthen" because of the Ethiopian revolution.<sup>23</sup> Six months later, in December, Ethiopia and the Soviet Union signed a secret military assistance agreement, the terms of which are still unknown although it included at a minimum the transshipment of 30 T-34 tanks to Ethiopia from Aden. Some estimates placed the Kremlin's commitment as high as 100 million dollars.<sup>24</sup> Finally, 3 months after surviving the shoot-out which solidified his hold on PMAC, Mengistu himself traveled to the Kremlin and concluded a "Declaration on the Foundation for Relationships and Cooperation" with his Russian counterparts.<sup>25</sup> This journey occurred less than 2 weeks after the Dergue ordered the American military mission and other US offices to leave Ethiopia.

In the time of approximately 2 years, then, Ethiopia had been "transformed" from a "fuedal" state with which the Kremlin had cordial relations to an "anti-imperial and anticolonial" state with which the Kremlin had increasingly intimate ties. To be sure, this "transformation" carried with it certain difficulties for Moscow, most notably the problem of how Moscow could maintain its influence in Somalia, a long-time enemy of Ethiopia, while it at the same time improved its relations with the Dergue. To the Kremlin, however, the possibility of losing influence in Somalia must have paled in comparison to the potential gain of "locking up" the Horn of Africa.

Amid these considerations, then, we return to Eritrea.

#### THE DERGUE, ERITREA, AND THE SOVIETS: EARLY STAGES

Ever since the Dergue assumed power, its policy toward Eritrea presented two faces. On the one hand, representatives of the ruling body indicated a desire to achieve a political settlement including Eritrean autonomy within an Ethiopian federation. On the other hand, the Dergue showed willingness to use military force to compel Eritrea to remain within the Ethiopian union. For their parts, the ELF and EPLF have presented similar faces, occasionally indicating federation may be acceptable, but for the most part seeking independence won through military action.



This situation first evolved in December 1974 when the Dergue offered autonomy within an Ethiopian federation to the rebel forces. Although the ELF and EPLF originally indicated interest in the idea, negotiations rapidly broke down as the Dergue mounted a full-scale military campaign against the Eritrean forces in early 1975.<sup>26</sup> During this period, the external aid that the Eritreans were already receiving was supplemented by additional aid from new sources—Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and certain of the United Arab Emirates. Additionally, the Foreign Minister of the EPLF, Osman Saleh Sabbi, met with the Soviet ambassador to Somalia in April 1975 and requested Soviet aid.<sup>27</sup>

After a respite in the conflict, fighting picked up again during the summer. In the wake of this fighting, the United States agreed to send Ethiopia 17 million dollars emergency supply of ammunition, and agreed to modernize Ethiopia's armed forces with 200 million dollars of Vietnam War surplus equipment extended over a 3 year period.<sup>28</sup>

Through the last half of 1975, the EPLF in particular expanded its influence in Eritrea. Again, the Dergue's reaction was a combination of stick and carrot. During early 1976, the Addis Ababa government assembled a peasant army of Christian farmers, promised them Eritrean land if victorious, and marched them to the Eritrean border area where they stopped. At about the same time, General Tafari Banti, then Chairman of PMAC, offered Eritrea regional autonomy and financial assistance.<sup>29</sup> On May 16, a "Nine Point Peace Policy" was promulgated which, according to Colonel Mengistu, offered the Eritreans their "inalienable right to fully participate in the determination of their social, economic, cultural, and political future within the framework of the concept of full regional autonomy."<sup>30</sup>

Neither the peasant army nor the renewed offer for regional autonomy succeeded in ending the conflict, and by early 1977 the secessionists were once again on the offensive. By early summer 1977, despite yet another split in their ranks, the various Eritrean liberation movements controlled 85 percent of Eritrea's territory and all but 300 thousand of Eritrea's 3.5 million people. The ELF had approximately 15 thousand fighters, while the EPLF had 25 thousand, and the new segment, commanded by former EPLF Foreign Minister Osman Saleh Sabbi, two thousand.<sup>31</sup>

These developments presented policy problems not only for the Dergue, but also for the regime's new allies in the Kremlin. This was particularly true after the Kremlin accepted PMAC as being "anticolonialist" and "anti-imperialist." Before this recognition,

Moscow was rather reticent about the Eritrean situation. On the rare occasions when comments were made, the Soviets observed, for example, that "the feudal regime, which held power in Ethiopia until recently . . . carried out a policy of internal colonization in Eritrea. This naturally led to increased separatist tendencies." At the same time, however, Moscow intimated that it preferred that Ethiopia maintain the "integrity of the state" and "preserve national unity."<sup>32</sup> Another article informed its readers that Communists "oppose actions that do not strengthen national independence but jeopardize it (such as the actions of separatists in Nigeria and Ethiopia)."<sup>33</sup> (parentheses in original)

After Moscow's acceptance of the Dergue's revolutionary character, the Kremlin was placed in a rather uncomfortable position: if it did not extend military aid to the Dergue, Eritrea would almost certainly attain independence, but if Moscow did extend aid, Soviet relations with Somalia would almost certainly be jeopardized. Additionally, Soviet aid to Ethiopia's efforts against the Eritreans would place the Soviets in direct opposition to movements strongly supported by Syria and Iraq, who themselves transshipped Soviet arms to the Eritreans.

Not surprisingly, the Kremlin sought to escape its dilemma by adopting a two-pronged approach of saying little and supporting a peaceful settlement of the Eritrean conflict. The Soviet Union recognized that Ethiopia's nationalities question was the country's "most acute problem," and applauded the Dergue's efforts to "solve the problem democratically," but nevertheless rarely referred specifically to Eritrea.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, a detailed 555-page Soviet book entitled, *National Liberation Revolutions Today*, published in 1977, made no reference to Eritrea and only passing mention to Ethiopia.<sup>35</sup> The two-pronged Soviet approach was highlighted during July 1976 when an Ethiopian government delegation traveled to Moscow. According to the final communique, the Ethiopian side informed the Soviet Union of the "peaceful steps" it had taken to "solve the Eritrean problem." Although the Kremlin offered a vague approval of the African regime's policies, the Soviet side ignored the Eritrean issue.<sup>36</sup>

It was also noteworthy that the Soviet Union never equated the Eritrean secessionists with reactionary forces in Ethiopia or codified them as counterrevolutionaries. During the Angolan Civil War, the Soviet Union had adopted exactly that terminology for both movements which opposed the Soviet-supported MPLA.<sup>37</sup> Thus, even though the Soviet Union supported both the MPLA in Angola and



PMAC in Ethiopia, it was evident that the Kremlin perceived differences between the anti-MPLA forces on the one hand and the Eritrean separatists on the other. To be sure, both groupings were being goaded on by "intrigues of imperialist circles," but in the Angolan case, anti-MPLA forces were *allied* with imperialistic states, whereas in the Eritrean case, the separatists were merely being *used* by imperialist states.<sup>38</sup> This was a position which the Soviets would develop more fully at a subsequent time, and which may be rationalized as a Soviet effort to avoid alienating both the Eritrean separatists and the "nonimperialist" states which were supporting them.

Still, it was evident the Kremlin was attempting to walk a tight rope on the Horn of Africa in regard both to Ethiopian-Somalian relations and Ethiopian-Eritrean relations. It is in this context that the introduction of yet another variable to the Horn of Africa must be viewed. The new variable was Fidel Castro and Cuba attempting to act as peacemaker in the complex Eritrea-Ethiopia-Somalia equation.

Castro toured Africa from March 1 to 31, 1977.<sup>39</sup> During his month long trip, he spent three days in Addis Ababa and at least one in Aden, where he chaired a secret meeting attended by Colonel Mengistu and Somali President Siad Barre. At the secret meeting, Castro advocated a Red Sea alliance of progressive states including Somalia, Ethiopia, and the soon to be liberated Djibouti, with Eritrea being an autonomous region within the proposed federation.<sup>40</sup> Although the federation concept was rejected,<sup>41</sup> it was nonetheless indicative of both the opportunities and contradictions which confronted Moscow—and increasingly Cuba—on the African Horn. A successful federation would have in fact "locked up" the Horn for Soviet influence. That the idea was rejected out of hand bode ill for continued success of the Soviet balancing act.

Shortly after the failure of Castro's mediating effort, Mengistu flew to Moscow. During his stay in the Soviet capital, the dilemma which the Eritrean question posed to the Soviets was once again underlined. At a Kremlin dinner held in his honor on May 4, Mengistu condemned the "reactionary organizations" who "call themselves Eritrean liberation fronts." To Mengistu, the fronts were "linked with feudalism, imperialism, and bureaucratic capitalism," and were sponsored by imperialist and reactionary Arab states which hoped "to tear Eritrea away from Ethiopia and establish full strategic control over the Red Sea."<sup>42</sup> While this was of course an understandable position for the Ethiopian leader to take, it nonetheless placed his hosts in a somewhat



embarrassing position. In his dinner speech, soon-to-be-dismissed Soviet President Podgorny merely noted that the Kremlin regarded "with understanding" the Dergue's efforts to "achieve peaceful settlement" to Ethiopia's nationalities problems.<sup>43</sup> The Kremlin was evidently still pursuing its two-pronged policy of saying little about Eritrea and supporting a peaceful settlement of the problem despite Mengistu's apparent desire to make the issue a more central consideration in Soviet-Ethiopian relations.

This does not imply that the Soviet leadership was unaware of the strategic importance of the Eritrean coastline. Indeed, in the joint Soviet-Ethiopian communique issued at the conclusion of Mengistu's trip, both sides affirmed that the Red Sea should remain "an open and international body of water."<sup>44</sup> While Eritrea itself was not mentioned, it was still apparent that the Soviet leadership was cognizant of the ramifications of an independent Eritrea. The Soviet media increasingly referred to the threat of the Red Sea becoming an "Arab Lake" during the spring and early summer 1977, and increasingly accused the West and "certain Arab states" of fanning "separatist tendencies in Ethiopia." Still, however, specific references to Eritrea were generally avoided.<sup>45</sup>

Thus, by early summer 1977, the Soviet Union's increasingly close ties with Ethiopia presented several contradictions for Soviet decisionmakers to ponder. With the Kremlin's influence in Ethiopia increasing, traditional Soviet ties with Somalia had been shaken. Ethiopia's attempts to solve its Eritrean problem by granting the province regional autonomy had been summarily rejected by the Eritreans, and the Soviet attempt through its Cuban intermediary to create a "Pax Sovietica" on the Horn of Africa, thereby solving Ethiopia's Eritrea problem in a somewhat different manner, had been rejected by the Somalis. The only remaining solution to the Eritrean problem, from Ethiopia's perspective, was military. Even if a final military victory over the Eritreans proved impossible, a modicum of military success was necessary to convince the rebels that they themselves could not achieve victory.

Ethiopia's only major source of military equipment was now the Soviet Union. Soviet military aid could be sent either directly or through transshipment from Libya or Aden, the only two governments in the region which supported the Dergue. However, if the Soviet Union tendered additional military aid to Ethiopia, the Kremlin's already shaken relations with Somalia would be further weakened.

Additionally, two pro-Soviet Arab states, Syria and Iraq, maintained close ties with the various Eritrean liberation movements and extended them considerable quantities of aid, as did much of the rest of the Arab world. Overt Soviet support for Ethiopian efforts against the Eritreans could consequently lead to strained Soviet-Syrian and Soviet-Iraqi relations, not to mention adding further tension to already strained Soviet relations with other Arab states.

Throughout the spring of 1977, Ethiopia's position in Eritrea deteriorated. As we have already seen, the Eritrean rebels controlled 85 percent of Eritrea's territory and all but 300 thousand of Eritrea's 3.5 million people. From the Dergue's perspective, the situation in Ethiopia's northern-most province was bleak indeed.

In Moscow, a similarly bleak picture was emerging. The Kremlin's March hope of creating a "Pax Sovietica" on the Horn of Africa had been transformed over a period of only two or three months to the fear of an anti-Soviet "Pax Arabica" in the Red Sea area. Soviet leaders consequently had a significant policy decision to make, influenced by factors above and beyond continued improvements in Soviet-Ethiopian relations: Should aid to Ethiopia in its effort to deal with the Eritrean insurgency be stepped up, and if so, how and how much?

### ETHIOPIAN CRISES: ERITREA AND THE OGADEN

While the Soviet Union pondered its dilemma, reports began surfacing that Cuban military advisors had been seen in Addis Ababa and Asmara. As early as May, the US Department of State reported that 50 Cuban advisors were training Ethiopians for combat both in Eritrea and in the southeastern Ogaden Desert where units of the Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF) were stepping up their activity.<sup>46</sup> By late July, another report placed three thousand Cubans in Ethiopia. The same report implied that Cuban forces were employed in combat roles in Eritrea, and quoted one Eritrean Liberation Front Officer, himself trained in Cuba, as saying, "All my feelings about Cuba have changed. I hate them and the Russians, too."<sup>47</sup>

An obvious about-face had taken place in Cuban policy toward Eritrea and Ethiopia. Whereas in previous years Castro's government had sought to undermine Addis Ababa's control of Eritrea and aid the rebels, it now supported Addis Ababa and opposed the Eritreans. In June 1977, Castro rationalized this turn-around by declaring the Dergue a "genuinely progressive force" and explaining that the Eritreans were now acting for an "international reactionary conspiracy."<sup>48</sup>



While it is outside the confines of this paper to analyze the nature of the Soviet-Cuba relationship in Africa,<sup>49</sup> it was nonetheless apparent that Cuban support for the Dergue coincided with Soviet policy interests in the area. This coincidence soon appeared miniscule in light of subsequent events on the African Horn.

During the late summer and early fall 1977, the WSLF supported by units from the regular Somali army launched an offensive which swept across most of the Ogaden Desert, a desolate area of Ethiopia long claimed by Somalia. By November, Somali and WSLF forces controlled most of the disputed region.

The Somali successes were impressive, but only part of a much broader canvas of activity taking place on the Horn. According to most reports, Soviet and Cuban military aid to the Dergue slowly accelerated during this period. Rumors circulated that the Kremlin had authorized shipment of 48 Mig 21's to Ethiopia, and the US Department of State reported that 150 Cubans and 100 Russians were advising the Dergue in its military efforts in Eritrea and the Ogaden.<sup>50</sup> In response to these and other indications of Soviet-Cuban support for Ethiopia, Somali President Siad Barre expelled all Soviet and Cuban advisers, ended Soviet use of strategic naval and air facilities, and broke diplomatic relations with Cuba in November 1977.<sup>51</sup>

According to one source, disagreement within the Dergue inadvertently abetted the Somali offensive during this period. One group, supported by the Soviet strategists who were coordinating the Kremlin's aid to Addis Ababa, favored an emphasis on operations in Eritrea to secure and consolidate the Ethiopian hold on the crucial port cities of Massawa and Assab. After the ports were secured, this group argued, attention could then be turned to the Ogaden. The other group meanwhile argued that a counteroffensive should be launched in the Ogaden immediately before the Somalis could consolidate their positions there. The disagreement was eventually resolved, with the second group winning out.<sup>52</sup>

The Ethiopian counteroffensive began in mid-January. While most operations were carried out by Ethiopian forces, it was later revealed that Cuban troops occupied a combat role as early as January 22.<sup>53</sup> Additionally, a massive 3 month Soviet military airlift which began in mid-December carried over one billion dollars of military equipment to the Ethiopian and Cuban forces. Soviet Antonov 22's brought 600 armored vehicles, 60 Mig 21's, two squadrons of Mig 23's, numerous T-54 tanks, and over 400 pieces of assorted artillery to the hard-pressed



nation.<sup>54</sup> By late March 1978, Siad Barre announced that Somali forces would be withdrawn from the desert. Although the WSLF promised to fight on in a guerrilla mode, the Ogaden War was for all practical purposes over.

The Eritrean conflict, however, continued on. During the course of the Ogaden War, the Eritrean rebels placed both Massawa and Asmara under siege, and further extended their control of the countryside. Using the Maoist slogan, "political power grows out of the barrel of a gun," the Eritrean national movements organized peasants into local militia units armed with captured Soviet and American weapons.<sup>55</sup> Although the movements remained divided by a number of ideological, policy, and personal differences, they had nearly succeeded in wresting control of the province from Addis Ababa.

The Dergue, however, had not conceded defeat in Eritrea. The Ogaden War had simply become its leading priority. Indeed, throughout the course of the desert conflict, reports continued to surface that Ethiopian units in Eritrea were receiving increased military aid and advice from their Soviet and Cuban allies. During January, the EPLF reported that it captured or killed several Russians and Cubans. Although the EPLF later retracted the claim it captured Russians and Cubans, it did not retract the claim that Russians and Cubans had been killed. The EPLF also accused two Soviet destroyers of bombarding rebel forces attacking Massawa. A Reuters dispatch shortly thereafter quoted an Ethiopian defector as confirming the EPLF accusations.<sup>57</sup> None of these reports was substantiated.

Since January, additional reports have regularly pointed to increased Cuban involvement in Eritrea. On February 27, an EPLF spokesman in Rome said one thousand Cubans were fighting in Eritrea and had attempted to help Ethiopian forces break the siege of Asmara. The same day, a US State Department release reported that Cuban personnel had been seen in Eritrea and were acting as "advisers and pilots."<sup>58</sup> Estimates of the Cuban presence in Eritrea were revised upward in March. The United States estimated that 200 to 300 Cubans were in Asmara, while the EPLF maintained that over 2,000 Cubans were in the Eritrea capital. According to the Sudan, "over a thousand" Cubans had been airlifted into Asmara. US sources revealed that Cuban pilots were flying reconnaissance missions out of the city, and diplomatic sources in Addis Ababa said some Cubans were making sporadic attacks to test the rebels' strength. Following the Somali withdrawal from the Ogaden, one report indicated that Cuban forces

were "apparently" turning their attention toward Eritrea.<sup>59</sup> By mid-April Eritrean spokesmen claimed that over 3,000 Cubans were in Eritrea, and that Cuban fighter pilots had joined Ethiopian ground forces on April 24 in an attack attempting to break the Asmara siege.<sup>60</sup>

The apparent increase in Soviet and Cuban involvement in Eritrea was accompanied by close consultation between senior Soviet, Cuban, and Ethiopian political and defense leaders. In December, Admiral of the Soviet Navy Gorshkov conferred with Cuban leaders in Havana, and the following month, according to one report, Soviet Defense Minister Ustinov and several Soviet generals went to Addis Ababa.<sup>61</sup> During February, Cuban Defense Minister Raul Castro traveled to Moscow where he met with Brezhnev and other senior Soviet military-political officials. Cuban Foreign Minister Isidoro Malmierca Peoli journeyed to Ethiopia in March and the Soviet Union in April, while Mengistu himself visited both Moscow and Havana in April. While it is impossible to know the subject of these various discussions, it is reasonable to assume they dealt with Ethiopia's twin crises in Eritrea and the Ogaden, and with how Soviet and Cuban support would be used to combat the crises.

On the Soviet side, recent Soviet commentary on both crises has increasingly blurred the distinctions between the Eritrean and Ogaden situations. Western and reactionary Arab states are allegedly working to undermine Ethiopian national integrity "now that there is a national democratic revolution taking place in Ethiopia" by encouraging "international counterrevolution and all kinds of separatists."<sup>62</sup> According to *Pravda*, Ethiopia's "multinational character" was being used by imperialist powers to "dismember the country."<sup>63</sup> The same article implied support for the Dergue's policies in both crises:

In a situation where the imperialists and their accomplices... are attempting to utilize national and separatist sentiment, Ethiopia's revolutionary forces view the national question in the context of the class struggle inside the country and in the international arena. They advocate the unity and state integrity of their homeland.<sup>64</sup>

At the same time, the Kremlin has increasingly accused the Eritrean national movements of being either knowing or unknowing pawns of foreign powers seeking to create a vassal Eritrean state under either Arab or Western tutelage.<sup>65</sup> The aim of this effort, according to Soviet commentary, is twofold: first, to undermine the Ethiopian revolution,<sup>66</sup> and second, to convert the Red Sea into an "Arab Lake" to guarantee imperialist control over "vital raw material sea routes."<sup>67</sup>



In a very real sense, then, there has been a recent concerted Soviet effort to discredit the legitimacy of the Eritrean separatist movements and make it appear as if they are "in someone else's game," to borrow a Soviet phrase.<sup>68</sup> This has been paralleled by a similar Cuban effort, made all the more striking by Cuba's earlier open support for these movements.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, when Cuban Foreign Minister Malmierca ended his March trip to Ethiopia, he affirmed that his government gave "total support" to the territorial integrity of Ethiopia.<sup>70</sup>

Ideologically, then, both the Soviet Union and Cuba have developed rationales for potential anti-Eritrean action, and, as we have already seen, numerous reports have located Cuban troops and Soviet supplies in Eritrea. The groundwork has been set for potential intervention.

However, ideological justification and military capabilities are not the only considerations which influence Soviet and Cuban policies toward Eritrea. Both nations' Eritrean policies operate within a broader context. It is to that broader context we now turn.

### CONCLUSIONS: ERITREA IN PERSPECTIVE

Soviet and Cuban foreign policies toward Africa have multiple objectives. Soviet foreign policy toward the continent has recently been described as seeking four goals: (1) to gain a voice in African affairs, thereby spreading the Kremlin's political and economic influence; (2) to promote Moscow's international security interests, particularly by obtaining African support facilities which would ease the logistical problem of maintaining Soviet naval units in African waters; (3) to undermine Western influence and control on the continent; and, (4) to prevent the growth of Chinese influence in Africa.<sup>71</sup>

Cuban foreign policy toward Africa may also be described as having several objectives: (1) to project the image of a nation morally and ideologically committed to national independence in the emerging world, thereby achieving status as a "leader" of the emerging nations; (2) to maintain its precarious and peculiar interdependent relationship with the Soviet Union; and (3) to diminish Western and particularly American influence in Africa.<sup>72</sup>

None of these objectives are pursued in a vacuum. Rather, they are being pursued on a continent which "judges the policies of the major powers by the degree to which they advance or harm (the African nations') own perceived interests."<sup>73</sup> African leaders understand that



the Soviets are "engaged in promoting their own interests." Indeed, as Colin Legum has pointed out, no African state aside from Ethiopia has publicly accepted the Kremlin's justification of its realignment with Ethiopia as being derived from "revolutionary duty."<sup>74</sup>

If African states are skeptical of Soviet intentions, the same is true of Arab states. Egypt, the Sudan, and Saudi Arabia, among others, have all warned the international community of a perceived Soviet desire to expand its influence in the Red Sea basin. Indeed, Soviet presence in Egypt, the Sudan, and Somalia was terminated as soon as the respective Arab governments concluded that Soviet policy objectives significantly diverged from their own goals. As for the new Soviet-Ethiopian intimacy, only Libya and South Yemen among the Arab states have followed the Soviet lead in developing close relations with the Dergue.

African and Arab attitudes toward the Cuban involvement in Ethiopia have been less easy to categorize. A Cuban military presence has existed in the African and Arab world since shortly after Castro's revolution, Cuban troops or advisers have been identified in Algeria, Congo-Brazzaville, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, South Yemen, and Syria, not to mention, of course, Angola and Ethiopia. In many of these instances, both African and Arab states have accepted the Cuban rationale that its presence was anticolonial and anti-imperial. The size of recent Cuban commitments, as well as increasingly close Soviet-Cuban ties, have given rise to increasing concern among some African and Arab states, notably Zaire, Egypt, the Sudan, Saudi Arabia, and obviously Somalia. While the degree of African and Arab cynicism about Cuban activities in Africa has not yet reached the level of cynicism directed toward the Soviet Union, it is nonetheless growing.

Still, in the case of Eritrea, the Organization of African Unity's continual support for the maintenance of territorial integrity in Africa may lend weight to Soviet-Cuban tendencies to intervene. This in turn may be counterbalanced by the fact that Arab states have rendered sizable quantities of aid to the Eritreans. Any major Soviet-Cuban effort against the Eritreans consequently may bring Arab recrimination upon both countries. In some cases, notably the Sudan and Saudi Arabia, such recrimination would matter little to the Soviets, but in other cases, notably Syria and Iraq, the story may be different.

These are considerations which Moscow and Havana must take into account as both capitals formulate their policies toward Eritrea. There are several additional considerations which neither Moscow nor Havana can afford to ignore. First is the reaction of states beyond the African

and Arab world to any new large scale Soviet-Cuban activity on the Horn. So far, in both Angola and the Ogaden, the United States in particular has been markedly restrained. Whether this restraint will continue must play a role in Soviet and Cuban policy.

Secondly, both Socialist countries must weigh whether the potential cost of military action in Eritrea is outweighed by the potential benefits. British and Italian veterans of Eritrea estimate that it would take years to defeat the Eritreans, with casualties running between three hundred thousand and five hundred thousand.<sup>75</sup> Unlike the Angolan and Ogaden ventures, then, an Eritrean conflict promises to be costly both in terms of men and equipment.

Finally, both capitals have certain ethnocentric considerations which are derived from their overall foreign policy objectives in Africa. From the Soviet vantage point, the Kremlin sorely needs a policy success in the Red Sea littoral. Since 1973, Moscow's influence in the Red Sea area has dropped precipitously. The Kremlin has suffered setbacks in Egypt, the Sudan, and Somalia. The only offsetting gain is Ethiopia, which itself will not be a Red Sea state if it loses Eritrea.

As for the promotion of its security interests, Moscow has similarly lost ground, most significantly at Berbera. Massawa and Assab thus loom increasingly important, as does the recently independent Djibouti. Assab's potential is underlined by the fact that much of the Cuban force currently in Ethiopia landed from Soviet ships there,<sup>76</sup> and, while too much should not be read into it, the Soviet Union recently made a pointed effort to establish diplomatic relations with Djibouti.

Finally, Soviet efforts on the Horn of Africa have influenced some states in the area to seek closer relations with China. In the past year alone, both the Sudan and Somalia have sent representatives to Peking in apparent efforts to obtain Chinese military assistance.

Thus, if an Eritrean solution eventuates which excludes Soviet influence from the embattled province, Soviet policy toward the Horn of Africa may only be described as a failure. Consequently, Eritrea must be a major factor within the Kremlin's overall African policy.

The same is not necessarily true from Cuba's point of view. As far as Castro is concerned, there is probably little international status to be gained by militarily defeating Eritrean secessionists, some of whom trained in Cuba itself. Cuban and Soviet diplomats in Addis Ababa recently noted an apparent unwillingness on the part of the Cuban leader to commit sizable numbers of men to the Eritrean conflict,<sup>77</sup> and in an April 26 speech in Havana, given during Mengistu's visit to the



Cuban capital, Castro hedged his bets by defending Ethiopia's right to "protect its territorial integrity . . . against Eritrean secessionists" while at the same time declaring that Cuban forces would not "remain with arms folded if there is a new invasion of Ethiopia."<sup>78</sup> And as we have already seen, the revolution in Eritrea is far from an invasion.

If in fact ideological and moral leadership of the emerging world is a leading motive force behind Cuba's presence in Africa, then there are conflicts in African areas other than Eritrea which present better opportunities for Cuba, notably in Namibia, Zimbabwe, and South Africa. On the other hand, Cuba's desire to maintain its precarious and peculiar relationship with the Kremlin may lead to an expanded Cuban role in Eritrea. In either case, however, it appears that the Caribbean island's interests in Eritrea are considerably less than the Kremlin's.

In the final analysis, potential Soviet-Cuban disagreements over policy toward Eritrea are as significant to the West as the outcome of the Eritrean conflict itself. At the very least, if such disagreement does in fact transpire, it may once again illustrate that Castro's commitment to global activism is Soviet-supported but not Soviet-inspired. At the most, it may deprive the Kremlin of an exceedingly useful agent for furthering its African policy objectives.



## ENDNOTES

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5. For a more detailed account, see "Eritrean Conflict," p. 16.
6. See "Eritreans Attack Ethiopian Plane," *The New York Times*, June 19, 1969, p. 11; "Eritrean Guerrillas Hijack an Ethiopian Airliner," *The New York Times*, September 14, 1969, p. 16; and "Jet, with Two Bodies, Reaches Ethiopia," *The New York Times*, December 14, 1969, p. 81.
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over Eritrea may lead to additional divergencies within the Soviet-Cuban connection. ↗

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